

Infant Toddler Think Tank Summary – January 2010

On Dec. 17, 2009 the Department of Early Learning, in partnership with Thrive by Five Washington and the Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program, sponsored an exciting all day gathering of parents and professional stakeholders from around the state. The primary goals for this day were:

- To gather stakeholder and specialist input to inform and advise future spending of infant toddler funds
- Think creatively about how we invest stimulus funds for infants and toddlers
- Develop ideas in a collaborative environment
- Test-model use of the [Draft Early Learning Plan](#) and explore the beginnings of an underlying theory of change

Overview

The response from the community was very enthusiastic with more than 70 in attendance from locales across the state reaching as far as Spokane, Olympic Coast, Bellingham, and Kennewick. Participants provided representation and stakeholder thinking across four infant toddler related perspectives: policy, practice, research and the experience of parents. Both in verbal and written feedback, it was clear that people found extremely valuable, the opportunity to connect with both new and long-time stakeholders committed to improving outcomes for infants and toddlers in WA. It is hoped that future meetings will have even stronger representation by parents and communities of color, in addition to engaging the many stakeholders who were unable to attend a day-long meeting during the busy holiday season.

The day got off to a strong start with a welcome by leaders from each of the sponsoring agencies: Dr. Bette Hyde (Director, DEL), Nina Auerbach (CEO, Thrive by Five), and Karen Walker (Acting Director, Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program). The passionate and resonating message from the three leaders was that this day presented a clear opportunity to not only listen to what the community had to say about very young children and their families, but to put into practice the basic tenants of the newly drafted Early Learning Plan.

The Current Picture

Next, participants were provided with overviews of what we know about the current status of infants and toddlers in WA and how they are currently being served by DEL, Thrive and ITEIP.

Washington Kids Count provided a compelling look at the [Characteristics of Children Age Birth to Three in Washington State](#). This presentation highlighted data about both what we know (EX: In 2008, nearly one-quarter of children in WA state were infants and toddlers; one-third of very young children are children of color; and, almost forty percent were in low-income families) and what we don't know (Ex: How well are we meeting these children's developmental and child care needs?). Additional data provided by the Washington State [Child Care Resource & Referral Network](#) shows there are more than twice as many requests for infant and toddler care, than for preschoolers, yet there are three times as many slots for preschoolers, than slots for infants and toddlers.

Karen Walker provided an overview of the [Infant & Toddler Early Intervention Program's](#) services and goals as well as a summary of how federal monies, including stimulus funds, are being spent. Currently, about 5,000

infants, toddlers and their families are being served by ITEIP at any one time, with almost 10,000 children served in the 2008-2009 fiscal year.¹ It was highlighted that, particularly in rural areas, many more children likely need services than are currently identified. Gaps were also noted in outreach to families with infants under 12 months of age and families of color. ITEIP plans to utilize American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (federal stimulus) funds to begin to address these concerns.

Nina Auerbach highlighted the many areas in which [Thrive by Five](#), as the state's nonprofit public-private partnership, is engaged in helping communities both on the ground and online. It was noted that creating an environment that supports early learning and positive child development involves supporting infants and toddlers in informal child care settings and within parent-child relationships, in addition to formal early care and education settings. With about half of young children in WA spending a majority of time at home with their parent(s), the need to balance addressing the needs and skills of professionals with that of parents and family members was raised by multiple participants over the course of the day.

Sangree Froelicher discussed how the Dept. of Early Learning was [Improving the Quality of Care for Infants and Toddlers in Washington State](#). Gaps between the need, particularly in regards to child care for infants, and capacity were highlighted. Further details on licensed child care in WA, including costs, can be found in the [2008 Market Rate Survey](#). Participants were interested to hear what survey respondents recently had to say about what's working and where improvements are needed to support directions outlined in the draft [2010-2011 Child Care Development Fund Plan](#). Survey responses reinforced DEL's ongoing work with partners to develop an outcomes-based early learning system that provides high quality early learning opportunities for young children and their families, and of greatest concern was the current state of services for infants and toddlers in WA. When asked about how best to promote social emotional development of infants and toddlers, great interest was expressed in training for providers on attachment, secure relationships between providers and children, and how best to support families with very young children. Respondents also were interested in increasing consultation for providers on behavioral concerns.

An Integrated Approach (Theory of Change)

To close out the morning, Sangree Froelicher and Kasey Langley, Organizational Research Services, led an exploration of using the [Draft Early Learning Plan](#) as a starting point for developing a Washington Infant and Toddler Systems and Services theory of change. The theory of change will highlight more specific plans and shorter term strategies in regards to infants and toddlers, orient these strategies within the overall draft Early Learning Plan and describe key context and assumptions associated with the theory of change. A goal of this session was to identify initial priorities in order to develop "starter dough" for a participatory theory of change development process.

While the rest of the day was to focus on the infant and toddler systems-building opportunities presented by the ARRA funds, participants were asked in this exercise to consider overall, "what needs to happen next" for infants and toddlers in Washington over the next three years, using the draft Early Learning Plan as a starting point for that thought process. It was noted that the draft Early Learning Plan has a 10-year focus and that it features one broad strategy called "Infants and Toddlers" (Strategy #4). However, that broad strategy has many potential more specific, shorter-term strategies. Furthermore, numerous other strategies of the plan also address infant and toddler issues. Together we explored how considering the needs of infants, toddlers and their families tie into the framework of the draft Early Learning Plan -- ready and successful: children, parents, families, caregivers, early learning professionals, schools, and communities. This session of the think

¹ Participants, please note your printed ITEIP handout had older data on it and the corrected information is contained in the PowerPoint linked to above.

tank was a first step in a process to develop and describe three-year priority strategies, outcomes and goals for infant and toddler systems and services.

Participants divided into small groups and worked to identify three-year priority strategies for addressing infant and toddler needs from the 34 strategies in the draft Early Learning Plan. Each small group had six dots to use to identify their priority strategies. A chart of the strategies and how groups voted can be seen [here](#). Participant priorities focused on four areas: Social-Emotional Learning – Parents, Caregivers, Early Learning Professionals, School Staff ; Home Visiting; Quality Rating and Improvement System; and, Health, Mental Health and Social Emotional Consultation in Early Learning Settings. A working group will use the results of this exercise to continue to develop the infant and toddler theory of change.

Investment Planning Workshop

Next, the group transitioned to a focus on how DEL might spend the 1.6 million dollars of stimulus funds designed to improve the quality of infant and toddler care. These funds did come with a series of [parameters/restrictions](#). Examples of [how other states spent infant and toddler targeted funds in FY 2008-2009](#) were provided to stimulate thinking. Everyone was encouraged to be as creative as possible and to write down ideas even if they fell outside of parameters. To ensure all ideas were captured from this dynamic conversation, all notes were transcribed following the meeting and are being reviewed by DEL.

Following the small group brainstorming sessions, table groups selected 3-4 priority areas out of their ideas, and reported back to the larger group. Throughout the report outs, it became clear that stakeholders placed great value on reaching out to families, caregivers and providers of all types where ever the infants and toddlers can be found. Many also expressed a real desire, with limited dollars, to start this work targeted at infants, toddlers and families with the greatest need.

Emerging Themes

There was a surprising amount of consistency across the priority areas reported by the tables. Upon review, five overarching themes or areas emerged under which the majority of suggestions could conceptually be grouped: Development of State Level/Large Scale Systemic Partnerships; Improved Understanding of Social Emotional Development and Learning; Support and Learning Opportunities for Parents, and Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) Caregivers; Development of Consultation Services and Systems; and, Expansion and Improvement of Quality in Licensed Child Care Settings. None of these five themes could be said to outweigh all others. In fact, there was a great deal of overlap between the five concept areas. For example, consultation was referenced as a mechanism for improving understanding of social emotional development.

Conclusion and Credits

Thanks to the dedication and much appreciated hard work of participants, the day ended with an outstanding array of ideas for DEL to use. Based on written and verbal feedback, the vast majority of participants left at the end of the day feeling pleased with the event and eager to come together again as a community to address the needs of infants and toddlers in Washington.

We could not have had such a successful day without the generous contributions of materials and resources from state and national partners. Our deepest thanks to: [Parenting Counts at the Talaris Institute](#); Karen Heying and the [National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative at ZERO TO THREE](#) ; the [Public Policy Center at ZERO TO THREE](#); and, the [National Center for Children in Poverty](#)

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